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A LITTLE MORE LIGHT

ON

ANDREW JOHNSON

BY

WILLIAM A. DUNNING.

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WILLIAM A. DUNNING.

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ANDREW JOHNSON.

It was not the fate of Andrew Johnson, during his service as President of the United States, to enjoy an overflowing measure of popularity and good repute. The unfortunate exhibition which he made of himself at his inauguration as Vice-President put him under a sinister cloud whose shadow remained over him for some time after his accession to the Presidency, in the spring of 1865; and after February, 1866, the incidents of his conflict with Congress made him the object of more widespread hatred and more virulent vituperation than has been the lot, perhaps, of any other man in exalted public station. Between the earlier and the later seasons of obloquy, however, there was a period during which President Johnson occupied a singularly high position in general public esteem. During the summer and the autumn months of 1865 the organs of popular opinion were practically unanimous in praise of the dignity, patriotism, and high purpose which were displayed in the conduct of the administration. Though doubt as to the wisdom of the President's policy in the South was deep and widespread, there was no disposition to attribute to him other than statesmanlike motives; and outside of a very small number of vehement Radicals, a willingness to let his plan of Reconstruction have a fair trial was everywhere manifested.

The good judgment displayed by Mr. Johnson and his advisers was an important factor in the pleasant situation in which the administration found itself. Of equal importance, however, were the peculiar conditions prevailing at the time in the field of party politics. The Republican party had practically lost its identity early in the war, and in 1864 its very name had been formally and officially abandoned. The convention that nominated Lincoln and Johnson had deliberately and ostentatiously assumed the character of a constituent assembly for the organization of a new party, and the name adopted was the Union Party. With the successful termination of the war, however, the single purpose which had given coherence to this new party had been achieved and the whole situation became chaotic. A revival of ante-bellum Republicanism was out of the question; for by the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment during the summer and autumn of 1865 the issue which alone had given existence and character to the Republican party was removed from controversy. What, then, was to hold together the voters who had elected Lincoln and Johnson? Nothing, apparently, save the offices and a traditional hostility to the Democratic organization. But hostility to the Democracy was becoming impossible to those who followed the administration. The course of the President during the summer in reference to the South had brought the Democratic leaders, hesitatingly and cautiously but nevertheless certainly, to his support. A concerted movement had begun to rally the ante-bellum Jacksonian Democracy to the standard of the administration. The letter files of the President offer abundant evidence of the strength and importance of this movement.[1] There may be read words of confidence and eulogy from such sturdy, if now retired, old war horses as Amos Kendall, Duff Green, and Francis P. Blair, Sr. There may be traced the process through which many of the War Democrats resumed their long vacant places in the councils of the old party and gradually moulded it to the support of Andrew Johnson.

The net result of the party situation just sketched was that overt opposition to the administration could not be said to exist. Though the radical faction of the Union party were busily working to organize in Congress resistance to the President's policy, their activity did not manifest itself openly, and the normal adherence to tradition and to the offices kept the state organizations of the party loyal to Mr. Johnson. At the same time the Democratic organizations also refrained from antagonizing him. Accordingly the President had the agreeable experience — probably unprecedented since nominating conventions developed — of receiving in a number of States the hearty endorsement of both parties in connection with the autumn State elections.

It was while the influence of this unique situation was at its maximum that Mr. Johnson was called upon to prepare his first annual message. The reception which this state paper met with was the climax of the brief popularity which it was his fortune to experience. The verdict of contemporaries was, almost without a dissenting voice, that the message was a model of what such a paper should be. The judgments of the leading New York journals are typical. The Tribune and Times, which, under Greeley and Raymond, were *a priori* incapable of agreement on any topic, defied logic and agreed on this. The Times declared the views of the message to be "full of wisdom," and to be expressed "with great force and dignity." The Tribune doubted "whether any former message has . . . contained so much that will be generally and justly approved, and so little that will or should provoke dissent." The Evening Post found it "frank, dignified, direct, and manly," with not a "single ambiguous sentence." To the Herald also it appeared "smoothly written," "clear," and "frank." The Nation — and here was praise from the very throne itself — declared that any American might read it with pride, and found solid hope for democracy in the fact that such a document should have been produced by "this Tennesseean tailor, who was toiling for his daily bread in the humblest of employments when the chiefs of all other countries were reaping every advantage which school, college, or social position could furnish."

This same tone of admiration was common to observers outside of journalism. Secretary McCullough considered it "one of the most judicious executive papers which was ever sent to Congress." Charles Francis Adams, minister to Great Britain, thought nothing better had been produced "even when Washington was chief and Hamilton his financier." The Johnson papers contain great numbers of congratulatory letters, in which the same tone is manifest, though these, designed for Johnson's own eye, need not be quoted as conclusive of their writers' opinions. Only two of these may be referred to as indicating what was expected to be the effect of the message. George Bancroft wrote that everybody approved the message, and that "in less than twenty days the extreme radical opposition will be over"; and Oliver P. Morton assured the President that his policy would be endorsed by the great body of the people, and urged Johnson to use his patronage unsparingly to crush the congressional opposition.

In running through the mass of comment on the message it is clear that the form and style attracted quite as much attention as the substance; and there is everywhere manifest, in qualified critics, a subdued amazement that Andrew Johnson should have produced just the sort of literature that the paper embodied. In the speeches and miscellaneous papers through which his style was known to the public, the smoothness, dignity, and elegance in expression that ran through the message were conspicuously absent, and there was no like dependence for effect on the orderly marshalling of clear but moderately formulated thoughts. Mr. Johnson had not yet, indeed, gained his unpleasant notoriety as a brawler on the platform; but he had a well-established reputation as a hard hitter in debate, who depended for effect on vehemence and iteration rather than subtlety and penetration.

The striking incongruity between the message and Mr. Johnson's other papers has never caused, so far as I know, any well-grounded denial of authorship to the President. In the Washington correspondence of the New York Nation of December 14, 1865, it is said: —

> "Some there are who have an intimate persuasion that the entire message is the composition of Secretary Seward. But those who are nearest to the matter aver that the Secretary of State is only responsible for the portion relating to foreign affairs, with an occasional retouching elsewhere of the expression, while President Johnson can claim full credit for the rest."

Mr. Blaine, when reviewing the period, was evidently impressed by the un-Johnsonese character of the message, and was thus easily led to support the view mentioned by the Nation's correspondent. "The moderation in language [I quote Blaine's words] and the general conservatism which distinguished the message were perhaps justly attributed to Mr.

Seward." Mr. Rhodes, in his fifth volume, indicates that his trained critical faculty gave him very serious doubts in respect to this matter, but that the doubts were almost overcome. "If Andrew Johnson wrote it [he says] — and the weight of authority seems to imply that he did — it shows that he ought always to have addressed his countrymen in carefully prepared letters and messages."

It is in the hope of contributing something to the elucidation of this matter of authorship that I have ventured to ask the attention of the Society to-day.

Some months ago I spent a few days in looking over the Johnson papers, now in the Library of Congress. I had no particular object in view, but was on a general foraging expedition through the material, ready for anything that might turn up. Least of all had I in mind the matter of the authorship of Johnson's first message. While going through the files of letters received, my curiosity was momentarily aroused by a note marked "private and confidential" (one always is unduly attracted by that label), and signed by a man of wide reputation, whose name had never, however, been prominently associated, so far as I knew, with the career of President Johnson. The note was so worded as to conceal entirely the matter concerning which it was written, but indicated a relation of a very intimate nature between the writer and the President. I made a memorandum of the letter, with a query as to what it was about, and dismissed it from my mind.

Several days later I was looking through the series of large envelopes containing the preparatory notes and various draughts of each of Johnson's messages. In most cases the envelope devoted to a particular message contains a considerable number of more or less full draughts, in various handwritings, of the treatment to be given to special topics, while the final draught of the message is in the clear, formal hand of a copying clerk. The annual message of 1865, however, differs from all the rest. The envelope devoted to it contains nothing of consequence save a complete draught of the message, in a uniform hand which is not that of either Johnson or any other person in the executive service at the time. As I was turning over the pages of this manuscript and wondering with mild curiosity why the first message should have come down in a shape so different from the rest, I was joined by Mr. Worthington C. Ford, Chief of the Bureau of Manuscripts. All of us here know Ford, — how he has a sort of sixth sense by which he can locate, at any range less than five hundred miles, any manuscript important in American history, and can identify at sight the chirography of any man who has figured in that history since 1492. Ford, glancing over the pages before me, observed in his quiet, casual way: "That looks like the handwriting of" so and so. I at once was struck with the force of the suggestion, since I had seen something of the writing of the person named. But what in a moment struck me as of particular significance was the fact that the name mentioned by Ford was the same name that was signed to the "private and confidential" letter mentioned above. Why this coincidence especially roused my interest will be apparent when the precise tenor of the letter is stated. It runs thus:

> "My task will be done to-morrow, but as no one knows what I am about and as I am my own secretary, I must ask a day or two more for a careful revision and for making a clean copy, which must be done with my own hand."

Recalling this passage in the letter and my curiosity as to what this task might have been, I hastily looked up my notes to see what the date of the letter was. It proved to be November 9, 1865. This was, of course, the precise time at which the message must have been nearing completion, for it had to be sent to Congress on December 5. The handwriting of the letter was, when compared, beyond all question the same as that of the manuscript draught. There is thus no room to doubt that the task referred to in the letter was the writing of Andrew Johnson's first annual message, and that the manuscript in the Library of Congress is the "clean copy" which the author made about the middle of November with his "own hand." A collation of the manuscript with the text of the message as sent in was made by Mr. Ford last September, revealing that practically the only differences, apart from the insertion of the routine paragraphs summarizing the work of the various executive departments, were such modifications of phraseology as would be likely to be made by the writer himself in proof.

That Mr. Johnson himself did not write the final draught of his message, is thus conclusively established. To what degree the actual writer was dependent upon the directions of the President — whether he was a draughtsman with full discretion or merely a literary reviser of Johnson's own draught — does not appear from the evidence at hand. The age, learning, political experience, and literary reputation of the actual writer render it *a priori* improbable that he would have needed or submitted to very rigorous restriction by a man of Johnson's antecedents. The East Tennessee mountaineer whose boast that he feared no one was doubtless the truth, must nevertheless, under the responsibility with which his crude but honest nature was now burdened, have looked up with sincere respect and deference to a man eight years his senior, whose early life had been passed amid the best cultural influences of his native Massachusetts, whose middle life had found him in the high places of power and dignity of the same party which Johnson was serving in lower places, and whose declining years were being devoted to the glorification, by the ways of literature, research, and learning, of that people and that constitution which were the theme of all the President's declamation and the object of all his fealty. It is *a priori* improbable, I say, that Andrew Johnson exercised very close supervision over the construction of this message; for the man who actually wrote it was no less well qualified a person than George Bancroft.

That Johnson's most praised state paper was the product, not of his own, but of a more competent writer's pen, is from the standpoint of serious history an interesting rather than an important fact. Neither constitution, law, nor custom has ever required that a President of the United States should personally frame his messages to Congress or other official documents, and it would be a safe conjecture that a relatively small proportion of such papers in our history have embodied the unaided labor of the men by whom they are signed. It *is* unusual, however, for a President to intrust the preparation of important papers to persons wholly outside the circle of his official advisers. Mr. Johnson's cabinet included at least two members, Stanton and Seward, whose qualifications for preparing the message were beyond question. If Stanton be considered as not available because of the indications he had already given of lack of sympathy with the President's policy, still Seward remains, — a man whose opinions, whose experience, and whose ability made him apparently the one person to whom resort should be made for the task in hand. It is not surprising that the widespread contemporary sentiment which Blaine reflected should have attributed a dominant influence in the message to Seward. Now that we know otherwise, now that we have found that a mind of totally different antecedents and training gave the final impress to the paper, we may possibly get some useful sidelights on the history of the time by speculating on the motives which actuated the President in having recourse to an outsider. Thus the discovery of the authorship may become important as well as interesting.

It should be understood, in the first place, that the intimate relations of Bancroft and Johnson are demonstrated by other evidence than that already adduced, and that the authorship of the message throws an entertaining light on some of their later correspondence. The letter already referred to, for example, in which Bancroft tells Johnson that everybody approves the message, rings with a different tone when we know with what personal interest and satisfaction Bancroft recorded this fact. Another letter, written just before Congress met, reveals Bancroft as a diligent laborer in the cause of the President's policy, though in this particular case the effectiveness of his efforts was impaired by the fact that they were exerted upon that particularly tough subject, Charles Sumner. Under date of December 1, Bancroft tells Johnson that he has just had a two or three hours' talk with Sumner, and tried to calm him on the suffrage question (fancy anybody calming Sumner on the suffrage question!); that Sumner was bent on making some speeches in the Senate, but intended to cultivate friendly relations with Johnson and would call on him; that Sumner agreed with Johnson on foreign relations, and that therefore the President might do well to conciliate the Senator by "a little freedom of conversation on foreign affairs." We know, from Pierce's memoir of Sumner, the sequel of this amiable attempt to make oil and water mix. The Senator called on the President, found him, like so many another who failed to be convinced of the righteousness of Sumner's views, hopelessly dull and wrong-headed, and left the White House to turn upon its occupant the turbid stream of Demosthenian and Ciceronian invective which had hitherto been directed at only the slaveholder and the rebel.

A little later Bancroft was greatly perturbed, as well as honored, by an invitation to deliver the oration on Lincoln which was to be the central feature of a memorial service of the two Houses. In a hasty note of January 8, he asks Johnson concisely, "What shall I do?" Why he should have thought it necessary to get the President's direction, does not appear. We know from Gideon Welles, however, that politics and the tension between Radicals and Conservatives were operative in connection with this memorial service, and that Stanton, who had first been selected as orator of the day, had been dropped as too radical and too little in sympathy with the dead President's Reconstruction policy. Possibly Bancroft feared some scheme to compromise him with Johnson, and hence took the precaution of consulting the President. At all events, the answer must have been favorable to acceptance, for Bancroft did deliver the address.

These incidents all confirm the personal intimacy between Bancroft and Johnson; they do not, however, explain why Johnson should have intrusted the historian with a task of such fundamental political significance as the construction of the message. While we must, for such explanation, enter the field of conjecture rather than of history, I am disposed to believe that the clue is to be found in a consideration of Bancroft's political past and of Johnson's projects for a political future.

It is unnecessary to detain the Massachusetts Historical Society with a description of George Bancroft's politics. His early apostasy from the federalism which dominated his family, his college, and his whole social and literary *milieu* is almost what Professor Hart would call an "essential" of Massachusetts history. He was the bright particular star of the unspeakable Jacksonian Democracy in his native State, was collector of the Port of Boston under Van Buren, was Secretary of the Navy and Minister to Great Britain under Polk, and remained steadfast in the Democratic faith till the wartime. Then, in the stress of arms, he became conspicuous among those so-called War Democrats whose fusion with the heterogeneous and ill-compacted Republican party so transformed it that its identity was quite lost. In behalf of the Union Bancroft wrote, spoke, and schemed with all the nervous and not always well-directed energy that was characteristic of him. It is a fact of some local interest in New York that his unqualified devotion to the cause of the Union contributed in some degree to make him president of the Century Club, — a distinction that really distinguishes in that philistine town.

This record of rock-ribbed democracy and Unionism could not but have been very impressive to Andrew Johnson, whose own record was closely parallel to it. By the autumn of 1865 the President, as abundant evidence shows, had become definitively committed to the general policy of giving to the Union party, now that the distinctive object of its organization had been attained, a character that should perpetuate the ideals and traditions of the ante-bellum and anti-secession Democracy. From the Radicalism that was seeking to revolutionize the social and political system, he turned by the instinct of his nature; from the Whiggery which might offer a refuge to conservatism, he turned by the habit of a life-long hostility. The principles and the men of the old Democratic party must, in his mind, now dominate the political situation. What were the principles of the old Democracy as they had been iterated and reiterated in Johnson's speeches? Government for and by the masses of the people; the sanctity and far-reaching autonomy of the States: the beneficence and perpetuity of the Union; the supreme and divinely inspired excellence of the Constitution: and the manifest destiny of the United States to lead all mankind in political wisdom and in the ways of righteousness and enlightenment. But even as we read this noble and exalted if somewhat Chauvinistic list, does it not seem to every one who knows even superficially the writings of George Bancroft that we are cataloguing the principles and ideals which *he* systematically ascribed to his native land? No Prussian scholar of the Bismarckian era was ever more certain that the goal of all history, when scientifically interpreted, was the unification of Germany under the Hohenzollerns, than Bancroft was that the climax of humanity's political achievement was the American republic and its Constitution. And so we find in the message that "the hand of divine Providence was never more plainly visible in the affairs of men than in the framing and the adopting of" the Constitution: that this was, "of all events in modern times, the most pregnant with consequences for every people of the earth"; that the supreme merit of this American system is the guarantees it embodies of permanence to the general government, indestructibility to the States, and immunity to the citizens in all their natural rights. We have, in short, the principles for which the old Democratic party stood in its best estate before the war.

To formulate these principles and to rally the people to them was, I believe, the purpose which Johnson had chiefly in mind when he confronted the preparation of his first message. With such a purpose presumed, the resort to Bancroft as draughtsman is an obvious and self-explained deduction. For the business in hand there was needed no old-time Whig, saturated with the heresies of a defunct and discredited party, no anti-slavery agitator, who had professed his faith in some law higher than the Constitution, no adept of the Radicalism which maintained that the inspired work of 1787 had proved inadequate to the exigencies of rebellion and had been superseded : none of these, but one who had, through all the storm and stress of ante-bellum and per-bellum politics, remained undeviatingly true to the creed of the Democracy, — to the view of the Constitution which Jefferson and Madison had maintained, and to the view of the Union which had been taken by Jackson.

The melancholy failure of the enterprise which was so hopefully inaugurated by Bancroft's literary labor, it is no function of this paper to describe. We may pause merely to recall the fact that the labor of the historian, though so notably unsuccessful in its political results, met with an entirely adequate personal reward in his appointment as Minister to Berlin in 1867. In this position he was retained by President Grant until 1874. To one who is aware of the feeling toward Johnson that prevailed in the Senate in 1867 and in Grant in 1869, it will always be a matter of curious speculation whether Bancroft would have been confirmed by the one authority or retained in office by the other if it had been known that he was the author of Andrew Johnson's first annual message.

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